SUBBTO 64, no. 1 (2019): 39-52
DOI:10.24193/subbto.2019.1.03

THE CHRISTOLOGY OF ST. ISAAC OF NINIVEH AND THE EAST SYRIAC THEOLOGY OF THE 7-8th CENTURIES

BENEDICT (VALENTIN) VESA*

ABSTRACT. Isaac of Niniveh is one of the most prominent East Syriac author, whose dates go to a complex historical and religious time (7-8th centuries) – the Arab conquest and the West Syriac proselytism, and yet a period of flourishing theological literature. His discourses have a practical perspective and they may be easily lectured as a gnoseological-mystical itinerary, communicated in a technical language, in a line of a specific tradition(s). Theologically speaking, the possibility of achieving divine knowledge can be expressed only within the Christological frame, as Christ is the perfect Man and perfect God, and any human knowledge resides in Him. In consequence it is dependent on the way one expresses the relation between Christ's two natures (*communicatio idiomatum*). Isaac of Niniveh does not systematically deal with Christology, but one may identify in his discourses an attitude, a phraseology and a mystic theology, in consequence, described as divine knowledge, perception and vision. In this paper we will deal with Isaac's Christological perspective in the frame of the Christological disputes of his time, and, in consequence, we will search for identifying the type of mystics he professes.

Keywords: Christology, incarnation, dwelling, dyophysitism, deification.

The first observation one can underline after an attentive reading of Isaac of Niniveh's discourses is that he disagreed with the doctrinal disputes and consequently he did not really intervene in the Christological discussions[1]. He is quite discrete and even silent when comes about the polemic doctrinal issues that occurred in the Church life of his time. Therefore one can hardly find salient points in Isaac's works regarding this topic. It is not difficult to observe his attitude in the admonishment he addresses against those who dogmatise and support doctrinal discussions – the right way of acting is the practice of virtue.

* *Very Rev. Lecturer, PhD, ThD, Babes-Bolyai University, Faculty of Orthodox Theology. E-mail: benedict.vesa@gmail.com.*

[1] M. Morony speaks about the mystical ecumenism professed by Isaac of Niniveh. For details see M. Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest* (Gorgias Press, 2005), 380.

We will give two suggestive examples: *Confound critics by the power of thy virtues, not by word; and the imprudence of those who will not be persuaded by the peacefulness of thy lips, not by sound*[2]; or: *When thou becomest angry at anyone and zealous for the sake of faith be cautious*[3].

The disputes around orthodoxy prove, in his opinion, that the truth has not been yet achieved: *The one who seems to be zealous towards men because of the truth, he has not yet learned what the truth is*[4]. This argument can be supported by the absence in his discourses of the problematic phraseology that generated conflicts in matter of Christology in the community he belonged to and by the historical information we have. We will address both the issues in the next few pages.

Isaac's Christological phraseology

We will firstly refer to the language the bishop of Niniveh employs for expounding his Christological vision. One can affirm that he uses the terminology specific to his East Syriac theological tradition, in particular inherited from Theodore of Mopsuestia, but with cautiousness and interpreted. We will give some significant examples, divided into two important categories. Firstly, a frequent expression refers to the description of the body of Christ as *temple/tabernacle of the divinity*: the human nature[5], borrowed by Christ, became *a sanctuary*[6], *a temple for His divinity*[7], or *a glorious Tabernacle of His eternal being*[8]; *a temple made of flesh*[9] or an abode – *the Man whom Divinity took from us for his abode*[10]…

---

[2] *Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Niniveh translated from Bedjan's Syriac text with the introduction and registers by A.J. Wensinck* (Wiesbaden: Nieuwe Reeks, Deel XXIII, 1, 1969), abbreviated I, IV, 33; for the Syriac text, Mar Isaacus Ninivita*, De perfectione religiosa,* ed. by Paul Bedjan (Paris-Leipzig, 1909), abbreviated B.

[3] I, V, 55.

[4] Isaac of Niniveh (Isaac the Syrian), *The Second Part. Chapters IV-XLI*, transl. by Sebastian Brock, CSCO 554/ Syr 224, (Lovanii, 1995), abbreviated II, 3.4,77; for the Syriac text Isaac of Niniveh (Isaac the Syrian), *The Second Part. Chapters IV-XLI*, ed. by Sebastian Brock, CSCO 555/ Syr 225 (Lovanii, 1995).

[5] ܟܝܢܐ.

[6] ܒܝܬ ܡܩܕܫܐ.

[7] ܗܝܟܠ ܩܘܕܫܐ ܕܐܠܗܘܬܐ.

[8] ܡܫܟܢ ܫܘܒܚܐ ܕܡܬܘܡܝܘܬܐ ; II, 5,1.

[9] ܗܝܟܠܐ ܕܒܣܪܐ II, 5,1; See John 2:19-21.

[10] ܠܟܘܪܣܝܗ̇.

the Man who completely became its temple[11]; *the divinity*[12] *chose to dwell*[13] *in man… like in a temple*[14]. This imagery has perfect correspondence in the New Testament. It is also true that, soon after the Christological conflicts, it was dropped by the Byzantine or the West Syriac theology, and yet, in the early theology it was indiscriminately used[15].

A second specific expression refers to the description of Christ's humanity as the *garment of divinity*[16], or the idea of God being *clothed* in humanity – *the Creator is clothed in human being*[17]. Professor Sebastian Brock has studied in detail *the theology of clothing* in the Syriac tradition and showed that this expression has a long story in the East Syriac theology, starting with the Scripture itself[18]. In short, one can say that Adam was *clothed* in light and glory. After the fall, he was stripped of his robe. Christ is the one who re-clothed mankind with this robe. There are three essential moments in this process: the Nativity, the Baptism and the Descent/Resurrection and, correspondently, three wombs – of Virgin Mary, of Jordan[19] and of Sheol[20].

When dealing with the incarnated Word, Isaac uses two of the terms implied in the Christological disputes, omitting exactly the one that created problems (ܩܢܘܡܐ -qnwma, hypostasis). In the frame of his own theological tradition, he speaks about two natures (ܟܝܢܐ/ kiane) united in one person (ܦܪܨܘܦܐ/ parswpa). This union makes the humanity of Christ be venerated together with His divinity. We will render below a text that suggestively supports the coexistence of the two natures, working in union:

> We do not hesitate to call the humanity of our Lord – He being truly man – God and Creator and Lord; or to apply to Him in divine fashion the statement that `By His hands the world was established and everything was created… He granted to him that he should be worshipped with Him

[11] ܡܫܟܢܐ ; II, 11,12.

[12] ܐܠܗܘܬܐ.

[13] ܫܪܝܪܐ.

[14] ܡܫܟܢܐ ; II, 11,12; dwelling – II, 5,6.

[15] For details see S. Brock, "Clothing Metaphors as a Means of Theological Expression in Syriac Tradition", *Studies in Syriac Christianity*, Variorum, XI (1992), 11-38, here 15-16.

[16] ܐܠܗܘܬܐ ܠܒܫܐ ; II, 11,24; See also: S. Brock, "Clothing Metaphors as a Means of Theological Expression", 11-13.

[17] ܒܪܝܬܐ ܡܬܠܒܫ ; II, 11,28.

[18] For the first time this expression was used by E. Peterson, "Theologie des Kleides", *Benediktinische Monatsschrift*, 19 (1934), 347-356.

[19] One can easily identify the sacramental dimension of Syriac theology.

[20] S. Brock, "Clothing Metaphors", 11-13.

> indistinguishably, with a single act of worship for the Man who became Lord and for the divinity equally, while the (two) natures[21] are preserved with their properties[22], without being any difference in honour[23].

Having observed that Isaac highlights the existence of the two natures in Christ, reflecting the definition of the councils, it is necessary to make a step forward trying to identify the way they connect themselves in the context of the Christological dyophisite doctrine of his tradition. As one could have already grasped, Isaac is faithful to the East Syriac Christology when using both the terms *nature* and *person* and, omitting the third problematic term (*qnwma*), seems to avoid any theological debate.

In the Second collection there is one important fragment where the Bishop of Niniveh presents a synthetic panorama of his Christological vision. One can identify the two terms involved in the theological discussions, but the crucial one (*qnwma*) again is absent. There he insists on the fact that, in the union, each nature keeps its own properties, to avoid any confusion of natures. His definition is clearly against the West Syriac Christology, when stressing that Christ is not in one nature:

> Il Cristo Signore è sia il primogenito[24], sia l'unigenito[25]. Le due cose infatti non sono in un'unica natura[26], perché diviene primogenito di molti fratelli, ma (é) unigenito per non eservi altra generazione prima e dopo di lui. Le due cose si avverano (rispettivamente) in Dio e nell'uomo[27], che furono uniti in una persona[28], senza che si confondessero le (proprietà) della natura per l'unione[29].

From all these examples one may identify that Isaac, describing the unity of God and human in Christ, highlights the distinction of the two natures, so as to preserve the proprieties from confusion. God willingly dwelt in Jesus and because of his sacrifice he was lifted up to God the Word and he was gifted with

---

21 ܟܝܢܐ.

22 Among the East Syriac councils only two address the issue of properties – that of Catholicos Joseph (554) and that from 612, during Babai the Great. They seem to echo the Chalcedonian definition. See: *Synodicon Orientale ou Recueil de Synodes Nestoriens/ abbreviated SO,* ed. and transl. by J.B. Chabot (Paris, 1902), 97-98.

23 II, 11,21

24 ܒܘܟܪܐ.

25 ܝܚܝܕܝܐ.

26 ܒܚܕܢܝܘܬ ܟܝܢܐ.

27 ܒܐܠܗܐ ܘܒܪܢܫܐ ܕܐܬܚܙܝܘ.

28 ܠܚܕ ܦܪܨܘܦܐ.

29 ܚܕܝܘܬܐ ; II, 3.1,49.

the same honour. This is the crucial point for his mystical theology, because the way he expresses the union of natures in Christ conditions the possibility of knowing God. Isaac asserts that: *All that applies to (the Man) is raised up to (the Word) who accepts it for himself, having willed to make Him share in this honour… so we have acquired an accurate knowledge*[30] *of the Creator*[31].

The soteriological role of Incarnation is interpreted in the same frame of the East Syriac tradition. When speaking about salvation, in particular, the Alexandrine tradition uses the term *deification* (*theosis*), based on the union of human with the divine nature and the *communicatio idiomatum* in the person of Christ. Despite the firm distinction of the natures in Christ, Isaac uses the same term to describe the process of knowledge, in a different perspective and, yet, not contradictorily[32]. He does not use it very often and yet one can find it in a triple sense – symbolical, theological, as well as mystical. So as to illustrate the symbolical use we will give two examples from the First Collection: the practice of ascetic life leads humans to become *a god on earth*[33]; or, in the adjectival from, the same concept is present: a spiritual man is called *divine*[34]. Occasionally, one can also find the concept in a theological form. In the Third Collection, Isaac's rhetorically asks: *And what way of life did it offer in exchange for becoming 'God'*[35]*? … What position could be greater than that of divinity? And behold: creation has become 'God'*[36]. [37] Thirdly, Isaac speaks about becoming *gods* from a mystical perspective. This time in the Second Collection one may find this idea expressed within the eschatological expression of the final unity: in the life to come *we all will become 'gods' by the grace of our Creator*[38].

The sacrifice, the resurrection and the ascension of Christ opened up the way of ascending human nature towards God. Using the words of Hilarion Alfeyev, while interpreting Isaac's theology, deification is *perceived dynamically, as*

---

30 ܝܕܥܬܐ ܚܬܝܬܬܐ.

31 II, 11,22.

32 In the Syriac terminology one may find the concept of *theosis*, but it is used very rarely in this form (ܡܬܐܠܗܢܘܬܐ). For details see S. Seppälä, *In Speechless Ecstasy*. *Expression and Interpretation of Mystical Experience in Classical Syriac and Sufi Literature*, Studia Orientalia 98 (Helsinki, 2003), 144-145.

33 ܐܠܗܐ ܚܒܝܒ ܒܐܪܥܐ ܠܒܢܝܢܫܐ; I, VI, 64 (B, 95).

34 ܐܠܗܝܐ; I, XIII, 84-85 (B, 124-125).

35 ܐܠܗܐ ܬܗܘܐ.

36 ܗܘܬ ܠܗ ܒܪܝܬܐ ܐܠܗܐ.

37 Isacco di Ninive¸ *Terza collezione*, edito da Sabino Chialà, Lovanii, In Aedibus Peeters, CSCO 346-347 (Lovanii, 2011), abbreviated III, 5, 4-5; On divinization in the Syriac tradition, see N. Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), Appendix I.

38 ܕܟܠܢ ܥܬܝܕܝܢ ܕܢܗܘܐ ܐܠܗ̈ܐ ܒܛܝܒܘܬܗ ܕܒܪܘܝܢ; II, 3.1,62.

an ascent of the human being, together with the whole created world, to divine glory, holiness and light[39]. We will quote below a paragraph where Isaac himself describes the process of salvation inaugurated in Christ's incarnation and potentially achieved by the whole creation. Here, the author, underlying the universal value of salvation in Christ, points to some expressions strictly connected with the process of knowledge and the theological controversies of his time – light and glory:

> Amid ineffable splendour (the Father) raised Him to Himself to heaven, to that place that no created being had trod, but whither he had, through his own (action), invited all rational beings, angels and human beings, to that Blessed entry in order to delight in the divine light[40] in which was clothed the Man who is filled with all that is holly, who is now with God in ineffable glory and splendour… His intension was to give to all knowledge of his glory[41].

Another important expression implied by Isaac in describing the union of natures in Christ is *voluntary union*, borrowed from the *Book of Heracleidis*[42] and used in the East Syriac Christology[43]. The Word of God incarnated in order *to renew us by the means of voluntary union*[44] *with the flesh*[45], revealing the way by which human may be raised to God's mystery[46].

Lastly, we will evoke a term used by Isaac, which seems at least unusual and, probably controversial for the East Syriac dyophisitism, despite its long history[47]. In order to describe the level of intimacy of creation with God,

---

[39] H. Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian* (Kalamazoo, 2000), 57.

[40] ܢܗܪܐ ܐܠܗܝܐ ; This expression also occurs at Evagrius: "Letters", ed. W. Frankenberg, *Evagrius Ponticus* (Berlin, 1912), 554-634), or some contemporary authors like Sahdona: *Martyrius/ Sahdona. Oeuvres spirituelles,* ed. by A. de Halleux, CSCO 255-256/ Syr 113-114, IV, 21; and Dadisho: *Commentaire du livre d'Abba Isaïe (logoi I-XV)*) *par Dadišo Qatraya,* ed. by C. Draguet, CSCO 326-327/ Syr 144-145, XIII, 12.

[41] ܝܕܥܬܐ ܕܫܘܥܒܗ ; II, 11,29-30; Evagrius, *Kepalaia Gnostica*, ed. by A. Guillaumont, *PO* 28 (1958), 1, II.55.

[42] P. Bedjan (ed.), *Nestorius. Le livre d'Héraclide de Damas* (Paris, 1910), 264.

[43] A. Vaschalde, *Babai Magni. Liber de Unione*, CSCO 79-80/ Syr 34-35, 91.

[44] ܫܘܝܘܬܐ ܕܒܝܢܝܬܐ.

[45] II, 5,7.

[46] One may identify the soteriological accent not in incarnation, in an objective way, but more in the revelation of God as love, developed in a subjective response of human. In fact, this is the very reason of Incarnation/ see II, 3.4,78, discussed by I. Hausherr, "Un précurseur de la théorie scotiste sur la fin de l'incarnation Isaac de Ninive", *Etudes de Spiritualité Orientale* Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 183 (1969), 1-5.

[47] Specific to the pseudomacarian homilies and, consequently, to some parts of Syriac theology; see C. Stewart, *Working the Earth of the Heart". The Messalian Controversy on History, Texts and Language to AD 431* (Oxford, 1991), 169-203.

achieved in the sacrifice of Christ, the Bishop of Niniveh uses the term *mingling*[48] of the Creator with the creation. He does not speak about essential unity, and yet he speaks about mingling: *the world has become mingled with God, and creation and Creator have become one*[49].

The conclusion one can draw from this short analysis is that the sharp distinction between the natures in the Theodorian tradition is not really present in Isaac's writings. The uncreated Word and the created man Jesus is one and the same person. Consequently, the union of Christ, which denotes the assumed Man to the Trinity, through union with the Word, represents the very basis or the perfect mingling of the saints with God50. And finally, salvation can be described as the process of the human nature's ascension to the divine light and glory of the divinity, by following Christ, who, by His union, deified human nature.

Isaac of Niniveh and the theological disputes in the East Syriac community

Regarding Isaac's biography, there are mainly two short notes, due to Ishod'nah de Basra[51] and an anonym author, published by Rahmani[52]. The bishop of Basra offers two interesting pieces of information around Isaac, which are most probably colligated. The first one refers to some of Isaac's sentences that were contested by Daniel bar Tubanitha, Bishop of Bet Garmai; the other one, located at the very end of the note, lists the name of Isaac next to that of John of Apamea, John Dalyatha and Joseph Hazzaya, while stressing the reason for his resignation from the see of Niniveh – the envy of the contemporary, the same attitude manifested against these three spiritual personalities. If the first source is dated 9th century, the second one15^{th} century, but, as Paolo Bettiolo suggests, the latter one might have used information and material very close to the events it evokes, around Rabban Shabur Monastery, taking into consideration the details it gives concerning Mar Yozadaq in his correspondence with Bushir, from Rabban Shabur Monastery, and the pacifist tone of the text[53]. He places the sources of this text at the middle of the

48 ܚܘܠܛܐ; For the history of the term at different Patristic authors see C. Stewart, *Working the Earth of the Heart*, 169-203.

49 ܐܬܚܠܛ ܥܠܡܐ ܒܐܠܗܐ ܘܗܘܬ ܠܗ ܒܪܝܬܐ ܘܒܪܘܝܐ ܚܕ ; II, 5,18.

50 II, 7,3.

51 Jesudenah, évêque de Baçrah, *Livre de la chasteté composé par Jésudenah, évêque de Basrah,* publié et traduit par Jean Baptiste Chabot (Rome, 1896), 63-64 (53-54).

52 Ephraim II Rahmani, *Studia Syriaca,* vol. I (Beirut, Deir el-Sharf, 1904), ܠܒ (32-33).

53 For details see P. Bettiolo, "Congetture intorno a un'assenza*:* Tommaso di Marga, Isaaco di Ninive e le tensioni interne alla chiesa siro-orientale tra VII e IX secolo", E. Coda – C. Martini Bonadeo (ed.), *De l'Antiquité tardive au Moyen Âge* (Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2014), 149-169, here 150.

8th century, in a time of a silent reception of Isaac's writings, after the first polemic stage[54]. This text mentions Isaac's subtle mind, to explain his resignation.

In a third note, dated 9-10th century, Hanun Ibn Yuhanna Ibn as-Salt[55] also evokes the contestations raised against some of Isaac's sentences. He writes that one of his visitors, Abu al-'Abbas 'Isa Ibn Zayd Ibn Abi Malik, *homme connu pour ses sentiments religieux, son intelligence, sa bonté et son mérite*[56], remembers that the Catholikos John Ibn Narsai spent one day next to him reading the works of Isaac. Being asked about his opinion on Isaac's theology and the contestation of Daniel, he had clearly responded that *Mar Isaac speaks the language of the beings in Heaven and Daniel speaks the language of the beings of earth*[57]. We do not know exactly what the three problematic ideas were, but we know from Abdisho of Nisibe (13th century)[58] that Daniel addressed a work against the so called *The Fifth Part* of Isaac's works. Sabino Chialà had published two homilies that possibly belonged to this collection, dedicated to God's providence[59]. If their authenticity can be proven, one might get an idea about the argument of the contestation[60].

Around these items of information, Dana Miller advances two possible explanations: either the lofty teachings of Isaac shook Daniel's theological conceptions or the envy and the malice against the saint, as pointed in Isho'dnah's notice[61]. Ibn as-Salt gives us some more information which might support these hypotheses. When speaking about the way Isaac's writings were received and read during his time, he asserts:

> This holy man wrote his epistles and works for perfect monks in whom he perceived a pure intellect, abundant understanding, indeficient knowledge, and perfect worship of God. And they, in turn, worshipped his writings, acknowledged their truth, adhered to his path, and were aided by the excellence of his guidance. Then these monks unanimously agreed to withhold his writings from all who were unable to comprehend them[62].

---

54 P. Bettiolo, "Congetture intorno a un'assenza", 149-150.

55 Cf. *Traité religieux, philosophique et moraux*, *extraits des oeuvres d'Isaac de Ninive (VIIe siècle) par Ibn as-Salt (IXe siècle)*, P. Sbath éd., Imp. 'Al-Chark' (Le Caire, 1934), p. 16-19.

56 Cf. *Traité religieux, philosophique et moraux,* 109.

57 *Traité religieux, philosophique et moraux*, 109.

58 *Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Catalogus*, 1725, 104.

59 "Due discorsi della Quinta Parte di Isacco di Ninive?", *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 79 (2013), 61-112.

60 It is about the very optimistic tone of the discourses up to expressing the idea of a final restoration. On this connection see S. Chialà, "Two Discourses of the *Fifth Part* of Isaac the Syrian's Writings: Prolegomena for Apokatastasis?", *The Syriac Writers of Qatar in the Seventh Century* (Gorgias Press, 2014), 123-132.

61 Cf. "Translator's Introduction: A Historical Account of the Life and Writings of the Saint Isaac the Syrian", D. Miller, *The Ascetical Homilies of St Isaac the Syrian* (Boston, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984), LXXXIII.

62 *Traité religieux, philosophique et moraux*, 109.

In one other place he stresses the same idea:

> The reading of Mar Isaac's writings is only suitable for a man who has plunged into the divine Scriptures, whose soul is apt for inquiries of the intellect and who has avoided the lust of the world in his thoughts and his mind… Youths have been rightly forbidden to delve into the secrets of the writings of this virtuous man, because wisdom is only known by its adherents[63].

There is a second interesting interrogation regarding Isaac's place in the ecclesiological landscape of his time. It is focused on the reason of his resignation from the see of Niniveh, after only five months from his election as bishop of this city. Isho'dnah of Basra gives no explanation for his withdrawal, he mentions only that *he abdicated his episcopacy by a reason which God knows*, while the text of Rahmani names *the acuteness of his intellect and his zeal* as the main reason to leave the see of Niniveh. This might be an argument, taking into consideration the loftiness of his theology, as we have highlighted above. A third simplistic explanation, this time evoked by Joseph Assemani and assumed by Nikephoros Theotokis, is found in Vatican's 198th Manuscript. This short extract states that shortly after his election as bishop of Niniveh, Isaac faces a common situation – he was asked to judge the cause of one man against his debtor. When he appealed to Scripture, by asking the one who had lent the money to forget about the debt or, at least, to prolong the loan refund term, the answer of the rich man was to lay aside the Scripture. The conclusion Isaac drew was that, if the gospel is not present, then his place is not there. And he decided to go back to his hermitical life[64]. This information might be correlated to an internal detail, where Isaac speaks about one hermit who left his solitary life and became bishop. The loss of divine grace is considered to be the result of changing his lifestyle. This recite might be an autobiographical piece of information[65]. This way of dealing is recurrent for monastics. Nevertheless, this last theory has no solid base to be accepted.

Around this problem, Sabino Chialà advances three hypotheses: Isaac's attachment to the solitary life, pointed above, a time of crisis for his church and his difficulty to integrate in a region far away from his native land[66]. Among these three hypotheses, we believe the most consistent and valid one refers to the polemical atmosphere that characterised his timing, with its two components – canonical and theological.

---

63 *Traité religieux, philosophique et moraux*, 75-76.

64 J. S. Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana I*, Propaganda Fidae, Roma, 1725, 445.

65 I, 35, p. 167 (B, 249).

66 S. Chialà, *Dall'ascesi eremitica. Ricerche su Isaaco di Ninive e la sua fortuna*, Biblioteca della rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa XIV (Firenze-Olschki, 2002), 81.

We remember from the short biographies we have that Isaac had been taken by Catholikos George, when he came to his native region in 676 to convoke a council[67] so as to solve an old conflict between the Metropolis of Rev Ardashir, which was at that time in schism with the See of Seleucia. He was ordained bishop in Bet Abe Monastery, in North Mesopotamia, where Isho'yahb III and George Himself received their monastic formation. In this context appears the envy of those who dwelt in the interior[68] for somebody coming from Bet Qatraye. Adjacently, stressing again Isaac's pacifist attitude in a time of harsh proselytist West Syriac attitude[69], we can easily understand that he might have been not very well welcomed and he did not feel at ease in this situation. Despite the fact that Isho'dnah does not condition Isaac's abdication on the envy of his faithful, but on the contestation around his theology, one can easily argue that this element occupies an important place when dealing with Isaac's position within the ecclesiastical landscape of his community.

Besides that, it would be of great importance to refer to Isaac's possible connections with the so called Messalian polemics. It is useful to bring into discussion again the first biographical note of Isho'dnah, from where one can learn about Isaac's three themes that produced reactions and the listing of his name next to the mystics condemned by Patriarch Timothy I. Fiey argues that the Metropolitan of Basra uses a neutral tone in his writings, except when he manifests a clear positive position regarding the three mystics – John the Solitary, Joseph Hazzaya and John Dalyatha[70], demonstrating that his opinion was *not always according to the official doctrine of his Church*[71]. Paolo Bettiolo shows that this is due to the direct attitude against Timothy's council and the sentencing of the three mystics. However, one can nuance Isho'dnah attitude – it reveals divergences with Timothy's position, but, at the same time, convergences with his successor, Isho'bar Nun[72]. It is also true that Isaac was not condemned in the *process of the mystics*, and yet it seems Isho'dnah identifies a connection between him and them, adding his name on the list.

---

[67] For the canons of the Council see *SO,* 215-226 (480-490).

[68] The territories around Tigris and Euphrates. The ecclesiastical provinces were divided into *internal*, the oldest ones, whose leaders participated to the patriarchal councils, and *external*, formed of territories recently evangelized, whose leader did not participate to the patriarch's election and they were designated directed by this one; cf. A. M. Eddé – F. Michau – C. Pirard, *Communautés chrétiennes en pays d'islam*, *du début du VIIe siècle au milieu du XIe siècle* (Paris, 1997), 26.

[69] See the foundation of Metropolis of Tagrit (628-629).

[70] Cf. J. M. Fiey, "Ichô'dnah, métropolite de Basra, et son œuvre", *Orient syrien* 11 (1966), 431-450 (here 450); "Isho'dnah et la Chronique de Seert", *Mélanges offerts au R.P François Graffin – Parole de l'Orient* 6-7 (1975-1976), 447-459 (here 449-450).

[71] "Ichô'dnah, métropolite de Basra, et son œuvre", 449.

[72] P. Bettiolo, "Congetture intorno a un'assenza", 154.

In the same frame, next to this information, we remember that during Isaac's time there was a suspicion of Messalianism around a few important characters, who eventually had to leave the monastery, after a lot of contestation from their brothers. It was the case of Mar Afnimaran, who founded a monastery, which John Dalyatha frequented before joining the monastic life, and Jacob Hazzaya, both of them spiritual fathers of Blessed Steven, the master of Dalyatha, in Mar Yozadaq Monastery[73]. This monastery was also accused of Messalianism, if we remember that Nestorius of Nuhadra, monk in this convent, when elected bishop of Bet Nuhadra, was asked to do an anti-Messalian profession of faith, before his ordination. Then, the latter one was the disciple and biographer of Joseph Hazzaya, the third author condemned by the council. Therefore, at least hypothetically, one can advance the idea that Isaac was not foreign to this theological direction. If we recall the idea expressed by Vittorio Berti, the East Syriac Church knew in its monasteries and schools *divergences regarding the conception of union with God and, in consequence, divergences on the Christian life, in general*, generated by the contact between two different conceptions regarding spiritual life – one more mystical, and the other more institutional[74]. Hence, one may speak about a Christological perspective that allows an experiential theology. Isaac himself was a significant name in this polemical meeting.

Conclusion

One can argue after this short analysis that in the East Syriac Church of Isaac's time there was no unitary Christological doctrine. We can speak either about parties or, more exact, about different perspectives within the parties. Thus, the goal of monastic spirituality was radically different from the intellectual practices. In this frame, the ascetics manifested an anti-scholastic attitude, by an experiential theology that gives space to a direct contact with the divinity, at the level of the mind and heart. To justify their perspective many times they advocated a balanced and conciliatory position, or, maybe, sometimes, reformative attitudes, in terms of Christology, and so they were not always in the line of their Church theological tradition. This ecumenical position was seldom assimilated as Messalian by the representatives of the *philosophical*[75] party of their Church community.

---

[73] Mar Yozadaq, who declared himself disciple of Isaac of Niniveh.

[74] Cf. *Vita e studi di Timoteo I († 823) patriarca cristiano di Baghdad. Ricerche sull'epistolario e sulle fonti contigue* (Cahiers de Studia Iranica 41, Chrétiens en terre d'Iran 3), Paris, 157-166.

[75] Cf. "The Culmination of Monastic Ideology: Isaac of Niniveh", A. H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom. The School of Nisibis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 184-188 (here 187-188).

Speaking about Isaac of Niniveh, to recall the phraseology of Michael Morony, *he was an important transition figure, coordinating nearly the entire set of ideas associated with love of mysticism*[76]. The same author adds other two names next to Isaac's name – Jacob Hazzaya and Joseph Hazzaya – in order to advocate the idea that a group of ascetics shifted the emphasis from ascetic mysticism, propelled by fear and induced by extreme forms of self-denial, to an ecstatic mysticism, based on the love of God. Thus, he adopted a conciliatory position, while advising believers to abandon all literature that could divide Christians[77]. In the same line, he expressed his mystical theology in a Christological language that avoids any polemic discussions. It is not about a simple quietism, so that to detach from the current evangelism, theological disputes and state intervention, but about liberation of the spirit from temporal authority[78]. He takes upon an *ecumenical mysticism*[79] which has as direct consequence a type of spiritual toleration[80].

REFERENCES

Alfeyev, H. *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*. Kalamazoo, 2000.

Assemani, J. S. *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana I*. Roma: Propaganda Fidae, 1725.

Babai Magni. *Liber de Unione*, ed. By A. Vaschalde, CSCO 79-80/ Syr 34-35.

Berti, V. *Vita e studi di Timoteo I († 823) patriarca cristiano di Baghdad. Ricerche sull'epistolario e sulle fonti contigue*. Cahiers de Studia Iranica 41, Chrétiens en terre d'Iran 3. Paris.

Bettiolo, P. "Congetture intorno a un'assenza*:* Tommaso di Marga, Isaaco di Ninive e le tensioni interne alla chiesa siro-orientale tra VII e IX secolo." In *De l'Antiquité tardive au Moyen Âge*, edited by E. Coda and C. Martini Bonadeo, 149-169. Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2014.

Brock, S. "Clothing Metaphors as a Means of Theological Expression in Syriac Tradition." *Studies in Syriac Christianity*, Variorum, XI (1992): 11-38.

Chabot, J.B., ed. and trans. *Synodicon Orientale ou Recueil de Synodes Nestoriens/ abbreviated SO*. Paris, 1902.

Chialà, S. "Due discorsi della Quinta Parte di Isacco di Ninive?" *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 79 (2013): 61-112.

[76] M. Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest,* 464.

[77] P. Wood, *The Chronicle of Seert. Christian Historical Imagination in Late Antique Iraq* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 162.

[78] M. Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest,* 450.

[79] M. Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest,* 380.

[80] *Deem all people worthy of bounty and honour, be they Jews or miscreants or murderers* (I, IV, 39)

———. "Two Discourses of the *Fifth Part* of Isaac the Syrian's Writings: Prolegomena for Apokatastasis?", 123-132. In *The Syriac Writers of Qatar in the Seventh Century*. Gorgias Press, 2014.

———. *Dall'ascesi eremitica. Ricerche su Isaaco di Ninive e la sua fortuna*. Biblioteca della rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa XIV. Firenze-Olschki, 2002.

Dadisho Qatraya. *Commentaire du livre d'Abba Isaïe (logoi I-XV)*) *par Dadišo Qatraya,* edited by C. Draguet, CSCO 326-327/ Syr 144-145.

Eddé, A. M., F. Michau, and Pirard, C. *Communautés chrétiennes en pays d'islam*, *du début du VIIe siècle au milieu du XIe siècle.* Paris, 1997.

Ephraim II Rahmani. *Studia Syriaca,* vol. I. Beirut, Deir el-Sharf, 1904.

Evagrius Ponticus. "Letters." In *Evagrius Ponticus*, edited by W. Frankenberg. Berlin, 1912.

———. *Kepalaia Gnostica*, edited by A. Guillaumont. *PO* 28. 1958.

Fiey, J. M. "Ichô'dnah, métropolite de Basra, et son œuvre." *Orient syrien* 11 (1966): 431-450.

———. "Isho'dnah et la Chronique de Seert." *Mélanges offerts au R.P François Graffin – Parole de l'Orient* 6-7 (1975-1976): 447-459.

———. *Assyrie chrétienne III- Bé Garmaï Bet Aramayé et Maishan nestoriens*. Bayrouth: Dar El-Machreq Éditeurs, 1968.

Hausherr, I. "Un précurseur de la théorie scotiste sur la fin de l'incarnation Isaac de Ninive." *Etudes de Spiritualité Orientale* Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 183 (1969): 1-5.

Isaac of Niniveh (Isaac the Syrian). *The Second Part. Chapters IV-XLI*. Translated by Sebastian Brock, CSCO 554/ Syr 224. Lovanii, 1995.

———. *The Second Part. Chapters IV-XLI*. Edited by Sebastian Brock, CSCO 555/ Syr 225. Lovanii, 1995.

Isacco di Ninive. *Terza collezione*, edito da Sabino Chialà, Lovanii, In Aedibus Peeters, CSCO 346-347. Lovanii, 2011.

Jesudenah, évêque de Baçrah. *Livre de la chasteté composé par Jésudenah, évêque de Basrah.* Publié et traduit par Jean Baptiste Chabot. Rome, 1896.

Mar Isaacus Ninivita*. De perfectione religiosa.* Edited by Paul Bedjan. Paris-Leipzig, 1909.

Martyrius/ Sahdona, *Oeuvres spirituelles.* Edited by A. de Halleux, CSCO 255-256/ Syr 113-114.

Miller, D. *The Ascetical Homilies of St Isaac the Syrian.* Boston, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984.

Morony, M. "The Culmination of Monastic Ideology: Isaac of Niniveh." In *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom. The School of Nisibis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia*, by A. H. Becker, 184-188. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006.

———. *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*. Gorgias Press, 2005.

Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Niniveh translated from Bedjan's Syriac text with the introduction and registers by A.J. Wensinck. Wiesbaden: Nieuwe Reeks, Deel XXIII, 1, 1969.

Nestorius, *Le livre d'Héraclide de Damas.* Edited by P. Bedjan. Paris, 1910.
Peterson, E. "Theologie des Kleides." *Benediktinische Monatsschrift*, 19 (1934): 347-356.
Russell, N. *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
Sbath P., ed. *Traité religieux, philosophique et moraux, extraits des œuvres d'Isaac de Ninive (VIIe siècle) par Ibn as-Salt (IXe siècle)*. Le Caire: Imp. 'Al-Chark', 1934.
Seppälä, S. *In Speechless Ecstasy*. *Expression and Interpretation of Mystical Experience in Classical Syriac and Sufi Literature*. Studia Orientalia 98. Helsinki, 2003.
Stewart, C. "*Working the Earth of the Heart". The Messalian Controversy on History, Texts and Language to AD 431*. Oxford, 1991, 169-203.
Wood, P. *The Chronicle of Seert. Christian Historical Imagination in Late Antique Iraq*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.